BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Kenneth R. Komo

Kenneth Komo was born in 1928 in the family store in Keōpū, North Kona, Hawaiʻi. His father, Kakuro Komo, emigrated from Hiroshima Prefecture, Japan to Hawaiʻi and worked for Kona Development Company as a locomotive engineer for the sugar plantation in the early 1900s. Around the 1920s, Kakuro Komo leased land in North Kona for his home, a general store, and coffee land. His wife was Yoshi Mimaki Komo from Yamaguchi Prefecture, Japan.

The youngest of four children, Kenneth Komo attended Honokōhau School through eighth grade, then attended Konawaena School, graduating in 1946. He then attended Progressive College of Commerce in Honolulu from 1946 to 1948.

Shortly after Kenneth Komo's return to Kona, Kakuro Komo passed away. Kenneth Komo took over operation of the family store. In 1953, he married Mutsumi Deguchi. Together they sold groceries, and gasoline. They also farmed and sold their own estate-grown brand of Kona coffee.

During Kenneth Komo's two-year stint in the U.S. Army, Mutsumi Komo tended the store.

At the time of the interview, K. Komo Store was still operating in its original location, and their farmlands were still producing coffee. The Komos raised three children.

Tape No. 35-11-1-00

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Kenneth R. Komo (KK)

Keōpū, North Kona, Hawai'i

June 14, 2000

BY: Warren Nishimoto (WN)

WN: Okay, let's begin. This is an interview with Kenneth Komo on June 14, 2000 and we're at the back of his store outside his house in Keōpū, Kona, Hawai'i. Is this Keōpū or Lanihau?

KK: Keōpū.

WN: Keōpū? Some people call it Lanihau?

KK: Yeah, mm-hmm. It's sort of the boundary, that's why. Sort of the boundary right here.

WN: Lanihau is north of us?

KK: Yeah. So you know where the astronaut [Ellison] Onizuka, the [family] store is? That's Lanihau.

WN: Oh, I see. But this place is actually Keōpū?

KK: Keōpū.

WN: What is your birth [year]?

KK: My birth [year] is 1928.

WN: You have a birthday coming up, then.

KK: Next month, yeah.

WN: And where were you born?

KK: Right here.

WN: Right here?

KK: Right here.

WN: So the store was always here and the house was always here in this same location?

KK: But this [house] I built in 1966. This is the house that I built, not my dad. My dad only had the store.

WN: Where were your dad and mom and yourself living [before 1966]?

KK: In the store right here.

WN: Oh, in your---you folks were in the store?

KK: Yeah, because upstairs was a living quarters.

WN: Oh, okay.

KK: Upstairs and behind of the store were living quarters.

WN: I see. Tell me something about your dad [Kakuro Komo]. What's his background?

KK: Well, as far as I know, from what I was told, when he came from Japan, they all had to work in the plantation. At that time there was a sugar plantation in Kona [Kona Development Company]. So he worked on that plantation as a locomotive engineer until such time the plantation closed up. Then after that he went up to Pu'uwa'awa'a Ranch as a truck driver. Then from Pu'uwa'awa'a Ranch he came here to run the store. So prior to him opening the store, the store was run by my great-uncle Mutsunobu.

WN: Komo?

KK: No, the last name is Mutsunobu. I don't know what his first name [was], though.

WN: Oh, I see. This your great-uncle on your father's side?

KK: Yeah. Then he went back to Japan. So my dad took over the store. And at that time, you know where the mailbox is? From the mailbox, that side, toward Kohala side, was the original store. Then when my dad took over he extended this side and he made an upstairs as the living quarters.

WN: I see. So prior to the upstairs being built, the living quarters was on the same level as the store?

KK: At the time, probably so. But I'm not sure on that part. Because this is the kind of story that they tell me.

WN: So ever since you remember, you remember upstairs?

KK: Right. Because I was born over here.

WN: So your father was quite adventurous.

KK: Well, he did all kind of things.

WN: Yeah. What about your mother [Yoshi Mimaki Komo]?

KK: Well, she came to Hawai'i as a picture bride, I was told. And she, too, worked on the plantation at first, then they all moved to Pu'uwa'awa'a Ranch. Then they came to the store.

WN: I see. So you're not sure when your father actually took over the store.

KK: What year?

WN: Yeah.

KK: Tentatively, 1920, I think.

WN: Nineteen twenty?

KK: Yeah.

WN: And your great-uncle had started it before that.

KK: Yeah, right.

WN: Okay. So was there coffee lands always here, too?

KK: When I was born, yes.

WN: You're the youngest of four children?

KK: Mm-hmm [yes].

WN: So what kinds of chores did you have around the house growing up?

KK: Growing-up time? Oh, when we were all going to elementary school, practically every family had their own chickens, pigs, and things like that. So our chores in the morning was to feed the animals, the chickens and the pigs, and then go to school. Then when we

come back after school, we have to go in the coffee land and do the coffee land job, like picking coffee during harvesting time. And not harvesting time we have to take care of the weeds and things of that sort. Then after we're done with that we have to come back and then feed the animals. And that was the daily chores.

WN: What were the animals used for?

KK: For home consumption. Those days, they didn't have supermarkets like now. So most of the farmers had their own chickens and pigs.

WN: You being the youngest of four children, was your upbringing different from, say, your older brothers and sisters?

KK: No, I don't think so. We're all in the same family. (Chuckles)

WN: Did they take care of you? Watch you?

KK: Well, supposed to be.

(Laughter)

WN: Maybe I better talk to them, yeah?

KK: Yeah.

(Laughter)

WN: What did you do to have good fun as a kid growing up around here?

KK: Over here? We had to do our own sports and things of that sort.

WN: So what, organized sports, or. . . .

KK: No, well, there weren't any organized sports, not like nowadays. Nowadays they have these Police [Activities] League and this and that, and parks and recreation, and this and that. But in our days there weren't any things like that. So we only got together among friends, and then we played. Nobody had one big, sizable yard to play in, so we had to go to the school. And the school was about two miles from here. But we used to walk back and forth every day.

WN: This is Honokōhau School?

KK: Yeah, Honokōhau School. It's Makua Lani [Christian School] right now. That used to be the old Honokōhau School.

WN: So what kinds of sports did you play?

KK: Mostly volleyball and softball. Marbles, we used to play a lot because we didn't have any basketball court to play basketball. The only basketball court we had in Kona was in Kailua, and Kailua is so far away.

WN: So marbles, volleyball . . .

KK: Volleyball, softball.

WN: . . . softball. Who were your friends, mostly? I mean, were there a lot of kids in this neighborhood?

KK: No, not too many. That's why the school was very small. But they used to have a lot of small schools here and there because the population was scattered all over the place. So I remember our school only had five teachers, and no cafeteria so you had to take your own lunch every day.

WN: What did you take?

KK: Well, whatever my mom made for me. Those days, you remember we used to have those aluminum lunch cans, flat one. Those was the popular one.

WN: With a section for rice or was it all together?

KK: It's not like the kind lunch can that the plantation worker could take. That one was round and double stacked. But no, for the schoolchildren was about this long, and this wide, and then was one level.

WN: Kind of flat?

KK: Flat.

WN: Yeah, yeah, okay.

KK: You remember?

WN: Yeah, I remember that. Okay. So tell me, what kinds of goods did your father sell in the store?

KK: Oh, when my dad used to run the store? It was a general merchandise store so he had all the various necessity things, plus he used to sell gasoline, and hardware, and clothing. Whereas like now, we don't sell hardware or clothing because there are lots of specialty

shops down in Kailua. So no sense we compete with them. So we discontinued all those lines.

WN: How did you get the goods?

KK: Oh, there were wholesalers that came from Hilo.

WN: Like which ones?

KK: Oh, Y. Hata [& Company], American Trading [Company], [Hilo] Rice Mill [Company], and lots of other small wholesalers.

WN: Okay, so you sold food. What foods did you sell?

KK: All the necessity foods, like rice, shoyu, salt, canned goods: sausage, spam, corned beef, and all the other Japanese goods, too.

WN: How did—the salt, for example—how did that arrive?

KK: Salt? Well, same like now, in the container.

WN: Oh, didn't arrive like in bulk?

KK: No. What would arrive in bulk was codfish. You remember codfish? Used to come in a box about this long.

WN: About two feet.

KK: And about this wide.

WN: One foot wide.

KK: They just laid that codfish. And then we had to sell by the piece. Whereas now, codfish comes all in [individual] plastic bags.

WN: So one of your jobs was to divide up the codfish?

KK: No, no. We just left it there and the customer just pick the one they like. Because there are some big and some small. And then we just weigh that thing and we sell it by the weight.

WN: Oh, I see. So besides the codfish, was there other things that you sold? You know, where the customer would take and you folks weigh?

KK: Oh yeah, like onion, potato, and things. All the other kind vegetable we had to sell by the weight. We never used to package like now. Nowadays, apple and orange and all those things come in bags where you can take one bag of each item. But in those days it was all bulk. So we just displayed and then they can take one or two or six or whatever amount they want.

WN: What about rice?

KK: Rice used to come in hundred-pound bags and fifty-pound bags. Nowadays, we don't see hundred-pound bags.

WN: Yeah, now we see twenty, I think.

KK: Yeah. Twenty, five, and ten.

WN: Right. So it would come in hundred-pound bags and you would sell it as hundred-pound bags.

KK: Right. Hundred [pounds] and fifty [pounds].

WN: Same with, like, Hawaiian salt?

KK: No, Hawaiian salt used to come in smaller five-pound bags.

WN: Oh yeah? Oh, okay. Anything else? Like *crack seed?*

KK: No, we never used to carry Chinese seeds or things like that, but we used to carry *ume. Ume* used to come in a big tub. And shoyu used to come in tubs, too, you know. Not in gallons. Do you remember that kind shoyu tub?

WN: No.

KK: Wooden tub.

WN: And then you would sell it how?

KK: The whole thing.

WN: Oh, you would sell the whole thing?

KK: Mm-hmm [yes].

WN: What if somebody wanted little bit? (Laughs)

KK: Most of the families before was big families, you know. Not like nowadays. Nowadays they only have two or three children. But in those days the smallest family was four, I guess. Like us was small. But there were families that had eight or ten children.

WN: And people would come in to buy? Or you folks would deliver?

KK: They would come in to buy.

WN: Did you folks ever go out and take order and deliver?

KK: No, we never did that.

WN: Oh, how interesting. (Chuckles) So it was all cash-and-carry kind?

KK: No, those days my dad used to have a lot of credit sales.

WN: How did that work?

KK: Credit sales, some of them pay monthly, but some of them pay yearly by the coffee that they harvest. In those days, we used to have one big wholesaler in Kailua called American Factors. And American Factors was the main wholesaler for us in Kona. Rest of them came from Hilo, like I mentioned [Y.] Hata, [Hilo] Rice Mill. But American Factors was the biggest wholesaler, and the only one [in Kona], anyway. So they used to handle everything, including lumber, and they used to process coffee, too. So what the farmers used to do was, give us coffee, and we'd take it down to American Factors and then they process, and then they pay us.

WN: Oh, so this wasn't just them paying you in coffee. This is actually you being the middle man between American Factors and the farmers. You folks were actually coffee brokers.

KK: No, actually they [farmers] paying us, but we didn't used to buy the coffee. We have to take it to the buyer, and Amfac was the only buyer of coffee.

WN: Okay. So if someone owed you, like, ten dollars worth of groceries, they would pay you in coffee?

KK: Well, the small amount like that is not worth it.

WN: Okay, well, let's say (chuckles) $500.

KK: Yeah, $500 or $1000.

WN: Oh, I see. So they would pay you in parchment or cherry?

KK: Parchment. And those days, everybody used to process [their coffee beans] and make parchment. So everybody had their own small coffee mill. They dry the coffee, then when they are ready to ship out then we have to take it down to American Factors. And they process and they pay us.

WN: Pay you cash?

KK: Well, check. So running a store in those days was a hard business because you don't have that ready cash. Like now, everything is cash-and-carry.

WN: So you would carry farmers for a whole year, then.

KK: Well, my dad used to. But nowadays we don't do that kind of business. That's old-fashioned. (Chuckles) And we cannot stand that kind of business, you know, carrying one account for one whole year.

WN: Do you remember, like, harvest time? That's when you folks would do better? Because that's when the payment would be made?

KK: No, not necessarily because they have to eat every month, you know what I mean? So their purchases are about the same.

WN: But you folks would actually get paid, though, one time—same time of the year by everyone.

KK: Yeah, after the coffee is harvested.

WN: So this would be around, what, December?

KK: No, January, February. Because coffee harvesting usually starts from around August or September.

WN: Did you folks get paid in other ways besides coffee?

KK: No. Well, if they had cash, they pay us cash. But no other way, not like they would give us animals or things like that. (Laughs) But mostly was coffee.

WN: 'Cause I know like [Makoto] "Mac" Morihara and Alfreida [Fujita], they were saying that they would get paid in *lau hala* sometimes.

KK: Well, that's their business, that's why. But not us. But Alfreida folks, their business was *lau hala*.

WN: So Amfac was where you got most of your goods from to sell in the store.

KK: Mm-hmm [yes]. It was convenient for us because we can just run down and pick up any time, any day, Monday through Friday. In fact, Saturdays, too, but Saturdays they would close early.

WN: What about fresh foods? Did you sell anything fresh?

KK: You mean frozen foods, like that?

WN: Yeah, or vegetables.

KK: No, no vegetables.

WN: No vegetables except onion and potatoes.

KK: Yeah.

WN: I see. Anything refrigeratable?

KK: No, because those days we didn't have any refrigerator, you know, this kind of display refrigerator.

WN: And you said that you sold dry goods, too?

KK: Yes.

WN: Like what?

KK: Shirts and pants, we also had that kind of bulk material. And then needle and thread, those things.

WN: You said hardware, too?

KK: We used to sell nails, and hammers, sickle, and all kind. Hatchet, and small things.

WN: Work clothes, too? Did you sell work clothes?

KK: Yes, work clothes. Before in our olden days they used to wear the blue work clothes, you remember?

WN: Yeah, *'āhina?*

KK: Yeah, yeah. Nowadays you don't see that, though.

WN: What about coffee-harvesting things like the basket?

KK: No, we never used to sell. They [farmers] used to make their own.

WN: Oh, I see. And when did you start selling gas?

KK: Oh. When my dad took over, I think around the 1920s, too.

WN: So ever since you can remember he was selling gas?

KK: Yes.

WN: And who were---your customers were mostly coffee farmers?

KK: Yes.

WN: And were they mostly Japanese?

KK: Japanese. But not anymore, though. Now, the population, Japanese is minority. We have other nationalities.

WN: So who actually ran the store, the day-to-day running of the store? Was it your dad? I mean, who was actually there all the time in the store?

KK: My dad and my mom. When my dad had to go in the farm, then my mom had to run the store. Just like the way it is right now. When I'm out, then my wife is running the store.

WN: Was the store the only job he had?

KK: He didn't have any other business. Just the store and the coffee farm.

WN: So what was your job with the store? You know, this was before you took over. How did you help your father?

KK: Well, after graduating from high school and went into business school, I used to help sell, stock up and things like that. I had to learn the ropes because after that he wasn't feeling too good. And in 1950 he passed away. So I had to take over right after that.

WN: But prior to that, when you were a kid, what were some of your jobs in the store to help out?

KK: Well, first thing, we had to clean the store, sweep and things like that. Then we used to display the merchandise. That's about it. They had to tell us what they like. (Chuckles) We didn't have any set chores.

WN: Did you wait on customers, too?

KK: Yes, when I came of age. During elementary school days, no, we didn't wait on customers.

WN: What were the hours of the store?

KK: When my dad used to run was—I presume, I cannot remember exactly, but—he used to open early, though, six [o'clock AM]. Six to about eight o'clock or nine o'clock in the night, I think.

WN: Oh yeah? And what, every day?

KK: Every day.

WN: Any holidays?

KK: Well, Christmas and New Year's, I think, that's about it. That's the two holidays [he closed the store], you know, when my dad used to run. Same thing what we doing now. But right now we cut the hours way down.

WN: What are your hours now?

KK: Right now is 7:30 to 5:45.

WN: Hoo, that's still long. (Chuckles) Saturday, Sunday, too?

KK: No, Sunday we're closed.

WN: Sunday closed.

KK: Yeah. But before, we [hardly] used to close. We used to work seven days a week. We started closing only about five, six years ago.

WN: On Sunday?

KK: On Sunday. Before that we used to work seven days a week.

WN: Hoo boy. (Chuckles)

KK: Rough, no? No time to go *holoholo*.

WN: So you didn't have any dealings with Captain Cook [Coffee Company]?

KK: No. The people was so far away.

WN: Oh, south side of Kona.

KK: Mm-hmm [yes].

WN: So yours was all Amfac.

KK: Mm-hmm [yes].

WN: And I know you grew up in the depression time. Do you remember your father saying anything about hard times during that time?

KK: Well, I was too young yet so I don't remember too much about depression times.

WN: Must have been rough, though, on the farmers.

KK: I guess so, yeah.

WN: Okay. And then World War II came. What happened during World War II?

KK: For me, I was still young yet.

WN: Yeah, eighth grade, maybe.

KK: Yeah. Some of my classmates volunteered when they came junior year, so they didn't graduate together with us. But for me, I didn't go in the service until after the Korean War.

WN: You went in, in 1955.

KK: [Nineteen fifty]-five, yeah.

WN: So what was school like for you?

KK: Well, for me was good. I enjoyed.

WN: Did you go Japanese-[language] school, too?

KK: Yes.

WN: And where was the Japanese[-language] school?

KK: Right next to the Honokōhau Elementary School. But the building is not there anymore, the Japanese-school building.

WN: Was that every day?

KK: Monday through Friday, yeah, every day.

WN: What were your favorite subjects in regular school?

KK: Well, I liked practically everything. Depending on the teacher.

(Laughter)

WN: Well, you must have been good in math, huh?

KK: Well, yeah, I used to like math.

WN: So you graduated in '46?

KK: [Nineteen] forty-six.

WN: So do you remember the store being—you remember any differences in the store during the war? You know, like for example, soldiers or increased business or anything like that?

KK: Well, as far as increasing business or things like that, I cannot tell you because I didn't manage the finances. But I know during the war there were a lot of soldiers here.

WN: Okay, so after you graduated in '46 you went to Honolulu. Why did you go to Honolulu?

KK: I went to business school.

WN: What did you want to do? What did you want to be?

KK: At that time I wanted to be an accountant.

WN: You liked math. (Chuckles)

KK: Yeah, but actually when I came back [from Honolulu] I wasn't able to go out and work because my dad wanted me to help in the store, which was because of his health, too, like I told you. Because not too long after that he passed away.

WN: Passed away in 1950.

KK: [Nineteen] fifty.

WN: So when you came back to Kona in '48 it was for that reason? To eventually take over?

KK: Mm-hmm [yes].

WN: How did you feel about doing that?

KK: Well, no choice, yeah?

(Laughter)

KK: Like it or not, somebody has to help.

WN: Your older brothers and sisters weren't interested?

KK: No, they were all in Honolulu at that time. And we had a small family, so no choice. And I was the only person that was living with them [parents] at that time over here. Rest of them were all living out on their own already.

WN: So when you came back '48, and your father died in '50, so that's when you actually . . .

KK: Took over.

WN: . . . took over. When you took over, were there any changes that you made to the business?

KK: Yes. First we had to remodel the store. You know, the store was, to me, it was not—I shouldn't say "old-fashioned," but it was geared for old-time people. But I had to remodel the store to make it a little more attractive and keep up with the times.

WN: For example, what?

KK: Well, the window, for example. You know the plate-glass window? There's two big plate-glass windows I put over there.

WN: Before [that], what, didn't have?

KK: They had only this kind of window over there. You see the small-kind window?

WN: Oh, with the panes?

KK: Yeah, you know up there? Going up and down?

WN: Yeah, the window pane kind. Oh, I see. So you put in one big plate-glass.

KK: Yeah, yeah. Right. That would look more like a store. That [other] kind would look more like a home.

WN: In your dad's time was there a sign? "Komo Store," or anything like that?

KK: No.

WN: Oh, no? Nothing?

KK: Uh, let me see. Maybe they had, because we used to pump Chevron gas, and Chevron used to put a sign. Close to the service station, Chevron put it up for us. So I think that was the only sign. Then the sign above the main entrance right now, I put that up.

WN: When you started?

KK: Yeah. But prior to that there was an ice cream company called Dairymen's [Association, Ltd.]. And Dairymen's made one sign for us. But we had to advertise Dairymen's. They had a sign "Dairymen's" and then they put "K. Komo Store" underneath. So they made one sign for us. Then Dairymen's went out of business and Meadow Gold [Dairies, Inc.] came in to take over Dairymen's. Then I made my own sign after that.

WN: I forgot to ask you if you sold ice cream, and things like that.

KK: Oh yes.

WN: Your father's time, too?

KK: No. After I took over then I sold ice cream and then frozen food, too. And fresh vegetables.

WN: Okay, so we were talking about remodeling and changing. You said you changed the front of the window, you put a sign, what else?

KK: Well, inside. I had to put gondolas. If you go in the store you'll see couple gondolas this way.

WN: What's a gondola?

KK: Gondola is a thing that you put your merchandise on.

WN: Oh, okay.

KK: Olden days, they used to put all the shelves [against] the wall. And they used to make the shelf way up high, you know. So you had to get one pretty good-size ladder. So I thought to myself, hey, kind of dangerous to be going up and down the ladder all the time, so I lowered the shelves. So, like, now you can go on the short ladder and reach the top shelf.

WN: So in your father's time when they had the ladders, did the customers go up to get the stuffs?

KK: No, no. We have to go up ourselves.

WN: So they just say, "I want that," and you folks would get everything for them?

KK: Mm-hmm [yes].

WN: Were the shelves behind the counter in those days?

KK: Yeah.

WN: I see. So when you came in you had to change that. So people could take [i.e., self-service].

KK: Mm-hmm [yes]. And before, I don't know how my dad used to do it, but they didn't have any price tag, you know. So I think my dad had a price book. But like now, after I took over, I put the price on every item so that when people pick up that item, they know how much they're paying.

WN: So when you took over, did it become cash-and-carry? Or was it still charge?

KK: Well, I cannot cut it [i.e., charging system] off overnight like that. So I had to carry that thing for several years. But eventually I talked them into making monthly [payments], at least monthly. My dad's time they used to charge off one whole year. And I told them I cannot stand that kind of business. I don't have the capital. Because I had to start from scratch. So all those systems I had to change.

WN: Did anybody grumble?

KK: Well, there are always grumblers, and grumblers are grumblers. But the people that understand, they tell, "Oh yeah, kind of hard, yeah?" For any storekeeper to run that kind of business, one whole year charge kind, you have to get lot of capital because the wholesalers want to be paid monthly.

WN: By the time you took over, were you still getting [merchandise] from Amfac?

KK: Oh yeah. They were like the main wholesaler for us.

WN: But by that time you weren't giving them coffee?

KK: Still giving.

WN: Oh, still giving?

KK: Oh yeah.

WN: But people were paying in coffee, though?

KK: Yeah, some of them were still paying in coffee.

WN: Was that something that was okay with you?

KK: Well, like I told you, it wasn't actually okay, but you didn't get no choice, yeah?

WN: Cannot help, yeah, I see.

KK: But better than they don't pay at all, you know. At least they paying. So not too bad. But eventually, cut it off, cut it off, make it shorter, then make it to monthly. Then like now it's mostly cash-and-carry.

WN: You still have some people who charge?

KK: Very few. But now they pay monthly, so not bad. But very few, only a handful.

WN: Are these like old-timers?

KK: Yeah, old-timers.

WN: Oh, I see. What about the coffee fields here? How has that---can you sort of tell me how that has changed over the years in terms of where the coffee went and what you folks did with the coffee that you folks grew here?

KK: Well . . .

WN: In your father's day, what did he do with his own coffee?

KK: Well, he made it into parchment and sold the parchment.

WN: To. . . ?

KK: Amfac. Yeah, that's it.

WN: And what about when you took over?

KK: Well, when I took over, for the last seven, eight years I started roasting my coffee. You know, I make parchment, and then I started selling roasted coffee in my store. And then I find that you make a better margin.

WN: Oh, if you do everything yourself?

KK: Yeah. And now, lot of people are doing the same thing, you know, they're raising coffee and they're selling roasted coffee. So right now, from what I heard, there are about seventy-five different brands of coffee in Kona. Because everybody wants to sell their

own brand. But if you go to the supermarket you don't see seventy-five brands, different brands. Lot of people, they try to sell their coffee [over the] Internet. They make their own brand, and they're selling coffee like that.

WN: How did you get the idea to roast your own and sell your own?

KK: Well, prior to roasting my own coffee, I used to buy coffee [to sell in the store] from one roaster over here. And a lot of people were saying, "Hey, we raising our own Kona coffee, and hardly any store sells pure 100 percent Kona coffee." In our store we used to sell Hills Brothers or Maxwell House, and things like that. We never used to sell 100 percent Kona coffee. So one of the roasters in Kona told me, "Hey, why do you have to buy my roasted coffee to sell in your store? Why don't you bring your own coffee, I roast it for you, and then you put your own brand [name] and you sell it." And that's the start of my roasting business.

WN: So you still do that? Have somebody who roasts your coffee?

KK: Yeah, right. I take my own coffee and I have my own brand.

WN: Is that how most of the small farmers are doing it?

KK: Yeah, that's what they doing.

WN: So they go all the way up to parchment, and then they . . .

KK: Take it to the roaster.

WN: Take it to the roaster. How many roasters are there in Kona?

KK: Well, there are quite a few. But for us, we only utilize two roasters.

WN: I see. And how long have you been doing this?

KK: About eight years already.

WN: Do you have all the equipment and everything to go all the way to parchment coffee?

KK: Mm-hmm [yes].

WN: You have a pulping machine?

KK: This is my pulping machine [KK points to his pulping machine.].

WN: Okay. This is all from your father's time? All this stuff?

KK: Although I had to renovate and improve the facilities.

WN: Getting back to the store now, the improvements that you made, can you think of anything else that you did that's different from how your father did it?

KK: As far as the store is concerned, well, like I told you, before, the way of displaying the merchandise was different. They didn't have too many gondolas and things like that. So I had to go buy even that medicine cabinet to sell medicine. I bought that.

WN: Where did you learn all of these new things?

KK: Well, I have to go and observe the big stores.

WN: In Honolulu?

KK: Yeah, right.

WN: Was there any stores that became like a model for how you wanted your store to be?

KK: No, no such thing because actually, when I came back from school at that time I didn't have the full power to do what I liked with the store, because my dad was still living. So I just left it the way it was, and then let him do what he liked. But when he passed away, it was all up to me. So I had to try to change the setup in the store to make it convenient for customers. Whereas before, everything what the customer want, you actually stay across the table as they decide, and I have to go pick the item and then bring 'em to the table and punch the cash register. Whereas now, I make it so that the customer goes and picks up the item they like—same like the supermarket—then they bring 'em to the cash register. And all I do is punch. So that was the biggest improvement.

WN: Quite a change, yeah? That, plus the way of payment, yeah? No charging.

What about your mother, now? Your mother lived until what year?

KK: [Nineteen] sixty-three.

WN: [Nineteen] sixty-three, okay.

KK: No, no, 1960. Ten years apart, 1960 she passed away.

WN: And what was her role in the business after your father passed away?

KK: Well, she knew how to run the cash register and this and that, so she used to help us in the store.

WN: Did she have any say as to how the store is going to be remodeled or anything like that?

KK: No, no.

WN: Over the years I would guess that the clientele has changed. How has it changed?

KK: Like I told you before, majority of the people was Japanese. But today Japanese is minority. So mostly other nationalities.

WN: And before was mostly coffee farmers?

KK: Mm-hmm [yes].

WN: What about now?

KK: Now, because we have lot of big hotels and other businesses, the children of the farmers are not working in the farm. They go out and work and they got lot of construction, too. And construction makes good money. So they all want to go out and work in the construction business.

WN: I guess what determines that fact is that people would have money or cash on them.

KK: Oh yeah, more cash.

WN: So with these changes that are taking place in your store and everything, what do you say the future of small business like yours is in a place like Kona?

KK: For me, I feel that if you are not trying to compete with the big stores or supermarkets, you can survive. Not too elaborate and make one big store. If you're going to merchandise so many things that the store is looking full all the time, you know, full of things. But if that thing doesn't move, you're making nothing. So you notice in my store, I don't carry things that don't move. I carry a little bit of everything, but I want the things that move. Because I'm not a supermarket, I'm just a convenience store.

WN: So can you give me some examples of what you sell right now?

KK: Yeah, two good examples is you have to get things like soda, ice cream, beer and sandwiches and things like that where people going to use every day. Plus, I have gasoline, which people need every day. If they're going to use the car they need gasoline. So that is another necessity. So those are the things that I carry. In other words, I'm not going to carry fancy merchandise where that thing doesn't move. That's the reason why I quit dry goods, hardware, and things like that. Even drugs, I carry only few drugs that people need every day, like aspirin and cough medicine or things like that. That's the kind of necessary things. And Band-Aids.

WN: Right. Oh, let me just. . . .

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

WN: Okay. Would you say that much of your business is tourist-oriented?

KK: No. Local. We don't get too much tourist trade up here because we're kind of far away from the hotels. But there are quite a few tourists that rent a car, then they drive around, then they stop. So we have our small portion of our tourist business.

WN: So how would you say Kona has changed since the time your father was—or since the time you were growing up till now?

KK: Well, populationwise, a big change. Lot of people living here now. A lot of new homes came up because a lot of rich people are coming in. And a lot of subdivisions. The reason why Kona started to grow is because they dug water wells and they struck good water.

WN: When was this?

KK: Oh, this is about twenty or twenty-five years ago, I think. So now they continue to dig more wells. So recently they dug one test well right above here, they found good water. And then they're going to dig couple more wells close by over here. So if more water is found, then development is going to grow.

WN: So is that good or bad to you?

KK: Well, in a way it's good. Well, as long as good people come in.

WN: What do you think the future of this store is?

KK: Well, when we retire, when we quit, that's the end of the store. Because my children don't want to run the store, and I don't blame them. Because like I told you, it's hard to run a small store if you're going to try and compete with the big ones. And a lot of big ones are here now, and they sell their merchandise so cheap. We cannot compete with them. In fact, like us, we patronize Costco (chuckles), because Costco is a wholesaler.

WN: Oh, you buy things from Costco to sell here?

KK: Yeah. Which is very convenient for us because it's close by.

WN: I guess now with the wholesalers now also being retailers, it's hard to compete.

KK: Yeah, right.

WN: So how do you feel about the idea of when you folks retire, there'll be no more Komo Store and, you know, other stores in this area are probably going through the same thing. How do you feel about that?

KK: Well, to tell you the truth, I've had several offers already, that in case I retire or quit, then they want to take over. So there's a possibility that somebody else might take over.

WN: And that would be good?

KK: Oh yeah, good for the people around here. Because surprisingly people sort of depend on small stores like this. You feel as though they can always run down to the supermarket, but for one or two items, they don't want to do that. So sometimes---our hours are 7:30 [AM] to maybe 6:00 [PM]. But we close maybe sometimes at 4:00. "Hey," they tell you, "yesterday you close early, eh? What happened?"

(Laughter)

KK: And then sometimes we go to visit our grandchildren in Honolulu. So when we do that, we close Saturday and Sunday. So when we come back, they tell me, "Hey, from now on you going to close Saturday and Sunday every week?"

(Laughter)

KK: I tell, "No."

(Laughter)

WN: Put some pressure on you, yeah?

KK: Yeah. So there are people that depend on us. So we're happy.

WN: Well, so good luck to you. Thank you very much.

KK: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW

Kona Heritage Stores Oral History Project

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